

THE SAGEBRUSH CHRONICLE



Photo by Dwayne Myers

Sara Joan Armour standing by her straw bale garden. January's feature presentation is by Sara discussing her experiences with this type of garden particularly emphasizing requirements for, and difficulties in, setting up this type of garden.

Tuesday, January 24 at the Nature Centre

- 7:00 to 7:45 PM: Business Meeting
- 7:45 to 8:00 PM: Socializing
- 8:00 to 9:00 PM: Feature Presentation on Straw Bale Gardening

Executive

President	Hugh Armstrong Armstr55@telus.net	526-1003
Vice-President	Anne Bernhardt	527-2792
Secretary	Betty Rainville brainville@shaw.ca	528-2925
Treasurer and Memberships	Eileen Cowtan ecowtan@hotmail.com	526-1264
Past-President	Dave McKenzie naturist@telus.net	527-1701
Directors at Large	Gary Martin gammag4211@gmail.com Ian & Angela Turner ianang@telus.net	878-3483 526-1350

MH Interpretive Program

(Managed by Grassland Naturalists)

Based in Police Point Park Nature Centre

Open Year Round

Tuesday to Sunday: 9:00AM to 5:00PM

Washrooms are on a timer and are open from
7:00AM to 8:00PM daily!

To get up to date information on what is
happening at the Nature Centre call the:

Nature Line at (403) 529-6225

Also find us on Facebook and Twitter
([policepointpark](http://policepointpark.com))

Jan. 3 to 29, 2017: Young Artists Inspired by
Nature Art Show. A remarkable display of nature
art by local high school students.

Jan. 21 to Feb 28, 2017: New Story Walk® "Ten
on a Sled" by Kim Norman. The opening time on
January 21 TBA.

Volunteers Required at the Nature Centre
in several capacities including manning the
desk on weekends, cross-country ski boots
maintenance, and ski trail setting. Contact
the Nature Centre if you are able to help.

The Sagebrush Chronicle is published ten times a year by
Grasslands Naturalists. **Submissions of writing and
artwork are welcomed but must be edited for
publication. Deadline: the 10th of each month.** If you
would like to advertise in the Chronicle, more information is
available from the editor. Submissions are to be sent to:
milton.spitzer@gmail.com (403-528-3120). Do not imbed
photos in articles but **do send** them separately.

The Society of Grasslands Naturalists encourages the study,
conservation and protection of all components of the natural
world. The Society provides educational opportunities, assists
in the collection and provision of species data, acts as
stewards of the environment, discusses environmental topics
and organizes member activities. The Society also manages
the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program.

General Meetings: 4th Tuesday, Sept. - May **Board
Meetings:** 1st Tuesday Sept. - June

To join Grasslands Naturalists and/or send a
tax-deductible donation, write:

**Grasslands Naturalists
Box 2491
Medicine Hat, AB T1A 8G8**

Contact info: Nature Centre 529-6225

Annual Membership Dues: Eileen Cowtan

Individuals \$20

Families \$25

Organizations \$25

Donations to Grassland Naturalists and Interpretive Program
are another great way to support local nature and nature
education. Tax receipts are issued for all donations over \$10.
Your generosity is greatly appreciated!

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do not necessarily reflect those of the editor and the
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reject or withdraw articles submitted. While due care will
be taken of all manuscripts, photos or artwork submitted,
GN cannot be held responsible for any loss or damage to
such articles.

GN Website:

<http://www.natureline.info/gn>

GN Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/GrasslandsNaturalists/>

You must be a Facebook member to view most of it.

It's Time to Renew your Membership!

Member's Corner

GN extends to one and all our best wishes for a Happy and Healthy New Year!

Welcome to new members **Donna and Tim Melsness**. We hope to meet you soon at one of our events.

Remember its time to renew your membership. A form is attached to this issue and the nominal fees are detailed on the previous page.

President's Message

I trust everyone had a Happy New Year and a great Christmas!

2017 starts off needing warm clothes! The cold snap is definitely invigorating but there is at least enough snow to do some cross country skiing, so bundle up and have a go!

Following the successful Lions Hayride Weekend, we again had some concerns, from the Fire Department, about access to the park for emergency vehicles (fire, ambulance and police) during these functions that draw a large number of vehicles. Corlaine and I met with Scott Richter, Superintendent of Parks, to address this problem. He will be reporting our mutually agreed upon steps to the Fire Department and we will wait to see if that is enough. The Family Day Program may be a time for a trial run of some of the possible solutions. It would be the ultimate irony if our big programs had to be shutdown due to their increasing popularity and success!

Keep March 15-17, 2017 in mind as that is the 7th Annual Canadian Badlands Tourism Development Conference and AGM in Brooks. We are hoping to have a GN table and display, with a few volunteers to answer inquiries about GN and the MHIP. We have also asked to present our Birding Trails PowerPoint presentation to the conference.

Other events coming up are the Feb 20th Family Day Program and World Water Day -March 22nd. There will be a need for volunteers, so please step up when asked.

As reported last month, the Bird Tales program was put on hold at Masterpiece and we now are aware of the change of ownership, so it is hoped, once the smoke clears the program can begin again.

Be sure to take a look at the webcam site, as it has been a very busy place during this cold spell. A very unusual visitor was a leucistic (light colored) magpie. It was white where white should be but the normal deep black was a pearly grey colour. Tell your friends and acquaintances about this site as we would like to see more hits. Access to the webcam site procedures are explained in the November, 2016 Chronicle or can be accessed from the GN website.

And a special thank you to those who braved the windy weather for the winter bird count.

Hugh



Photo by Hugh Armstrong

Exciting Sightings

With the arrival of the winter solstice on December 21st, daylight hours reached their minimum, as have the numbers and species diversity of reported sightings. Irruptive winter finches, such as **Common Redpoll**, **Red Crossbill**, **White-winged Crossbill**, **Purple Finch**, **Pine Siskin**, **Pine Grosbeak**, or the erratic **Evening Grosbeak**, have yet to make an appearance at local feeders. Medicine Hat birders have been mostly preoccupied with Christmas Bird Counts during the latter part of December and early January, however some exciting sightings outside of the CBC count circles/and dates have been reported:

A flock of about 80 **Snow Buntings** was observed by Ben Verner and Bob Frew alongside TWP Rd. 62, north of the hamlet of Manyberries on December 28th, as is often the case, the bunting were mixed with a smaller number of **Horned Larks**. In winter snow buntings have a brownish head, neck and back, whereas in breeding plumage they are entirely black and white.

An **American Goldfinch** was reported by the interpretive staff at the Police Point Park Nature Centre feeders on December 24th. Whereas in summer the males' striking breeding plumage makes it highly detectable, in its dull winter plumage the species may remain unnoticed by birders. This widespread songbird breeds in the grasslands region usually departs by mid-September.

On January 4th, Hugh Armstrong, Scott Richter, and Corlaine Gardner were

sitting at the bird watching window of the Nature Centre, and observed a leucistic **Black-billed Magpie**. Grey and white rather than the usual black and white, leucistic magpies are often referred to as ghost birds.

Rob, Corlaine, and Laurel Gardner reported sighting 19 **Rough-legged Hawks** while travelling north along HWY 884 between Suffield and Youngstown on December 23rd. Such gatherings of this buteo species in the grasslands in early winter are not uncommon.

A flock of about 30 **Bohemian Waxwings** was observed foraging on the remaining berry crop at Police Point Park on January 6th. Their rust-coloured undertail coverts distinguish them from **Cedar Waxwings**.

A productive day of birding by Dan and Mark Schiebelbein on January 8th, started with the sighting of a female **Snowy Owl** at TWP Rd. 120/RGE Rd. 74. Upon their arrival in the Manyberries area later that day, the brothers observed two **Golden Eagles** near the east shore of Pakowki Lake, and then while driving the surrounding RGE and TWP roads also encountered; an estimated 100 **Sharp-tailed Grouse**, 60 **Ring-necked Pheasant**, several **Gray Partridge**, a **Northern Harrier**, 10 **American Tree Sparrows**, a dark morph **Rough-legged Hawk**, and numerous **Horned Larks**.

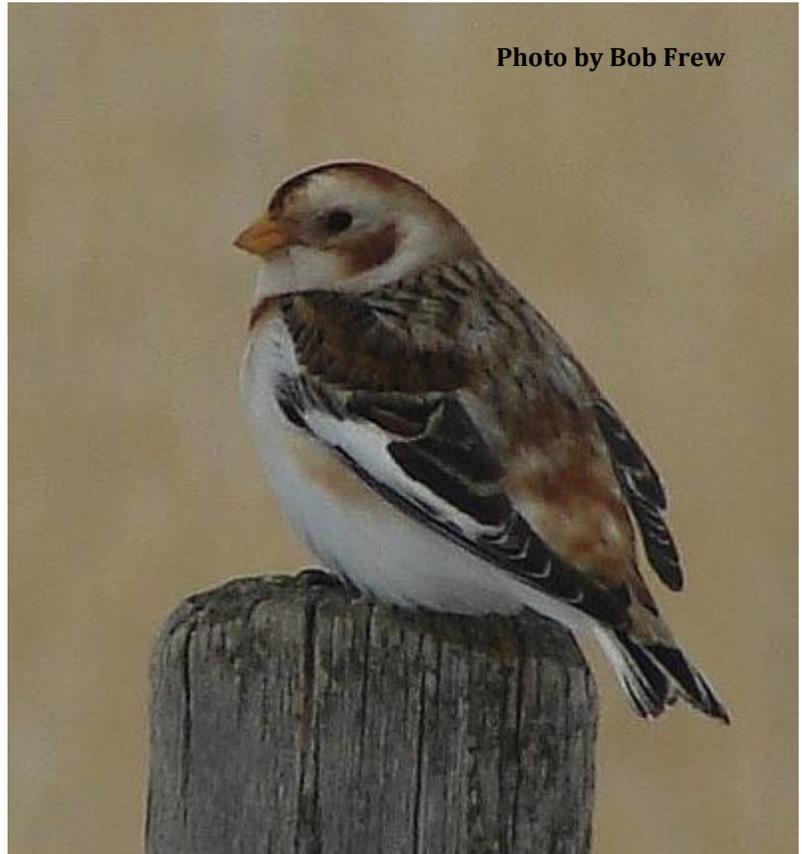


Photo by Bob Frew

Send your exciting sightings to Bob Frew: phone 403-526-4573, or e-mail Robert.frew@shaw.ca

35th Annual Christmas Bird Count (2016)

Co-sponsored by the MH Interpretive Program and The Society of Grasslands Naturalists.

Many thanks to the 41 participants who surveyed territories during the 35th anniversary of the Medicine Hat Christmas Bird Count (CBC) held on Sunday, December 18. Also, a big thank you goes out to the 18 feeder watchers who participated including 3 new contributors. The Interpretive Program continues to ask Hatters with feeders to monitor them on count day and there has been a consistent group of 15 to 25 observers annually. Having these folks participate usually adds one or more species seen exclusively by feeder watchers to the count's species total.

Count day temperatures were relatively mild (Low = -10°/High = -1°C); however, it was a blustery day with wind speeds of 40-50 km/hr and gusts to 90 km/hr. Most observers reported reduced bird activity for their assigned areas and feeder watchers also indicated the same. Snow levels were low and no one reported any difficulties with access. All 24 territories were assigned and surveyed this year.

Despite the windy conditions, 52 species were observed, which was 1 more than 2015, similar to species totals since 2001 (average = 55), and about 15% above the long-term average (34 years) of 45. The wind likely impacted the number of individual birds observed. In 2016, there were 18,337 individual birds counted, which was 38% below last year's record total of 29,451. The 2016 number was still relatively close to the 10-year average (20,400) and 40% above the long-term average (13,262). Declines in individuals observed were most apparent with Canada Geese and Mallards as they were down 48% and 40%, respectively from 2015. It is possible the windy conditions kept these species grounded in areas inaccessible to observers, although some individuals may have left the area because of frigid temperatures earlier in December. One other species, European Starling, exhibited a large decline; this year's total (380) was the lowest since 2010 (471) and 68% less than last year (1,197) and 14% below the long-term average (442). In comparison, Starling's averaged 1,274 from 2011 through 2015. Reasons for the 1-year decline are not clear at this time.

Feeder watchers observed 1 species (Sharp-shinned Hawk) exclusive of those monitoring assigned territories. One species, White-breasted Nuthatch was observed during Count Week but not on Count Day. No new species to the count were found in 2016.

Similarly to 2015, there were 2 species with high counts this year and they were Eurasian Collared-doves (211, previous high 147 in 2013) and American Crows (62, previous high 41 in 2014). Collared-doves first appeared on our CBC in 2003 and have increased steadily since then. The record Crow numbers this year were mirrored by a 34% increase in Black-billed Magpie numbers from 2015 and were indicative of Corvids returning to levels similar to those observed before West Nile impacted populations from 2004 to 2009.

Regarding the Top Ten Species, the list remained consistent from 2015 with Canada Goose and Mallard leading the way despite fewer individuals observed this year. The 2 most noticeable changes were European Starlings dropping down from third to the seventh position and Common Redpolls were replaced by Snow Buntings. The Snow Buntings were seen in 2 flocks by the same observer south of Medicine Hat.

Three species of note reappeared on the CBC in 2016 after short absences. Horned Larks (79) had not been observed in 5 years and the 2 waxwings (Bohemian, 51 and Cedar, 5) were absent from the 2015 CBC. Four other species were observed this year after extensive absences: Hooded Merganser (2, last seen 2004), Song Sparrow (1, last seen 2004), Western Meadowlark (2, last seen 2007), and Brewer's Blackbird (3, last seen 1999). Other species generally counted on our CBC that were seen in 2016 but not in 2015 included: Sharp-shinned Hawk (1), Northern Goshawk (2), Northern Shrike (1), Brown Creeper (3), Golden-crowned Kinglet (1), and Townsend's Solitaire (1).

There were 26 species typically seen on our CBC that were not observed in 2016 (see full list in table below). Of those, 6 species have not been observed for more than 5 years: Canvasback (2008), Greater Scaup (2009), Northern Harrier (2005), Short-eared Owl (2010), Purple Finch (2009), and Evening Grosbeak (2007).

A complete species list, along with data from the previous 3 years is enclosed below. Birders interested in the results of this and/or other Christmas bird counts can find them at:

<http://web4.audubon.org/bird/cbc/hr/index.html> . Your comments are welcomed, and should be forwarded to the Nature Line at (403) 529-6225 or marty.drut@natureline.info .

Good Birding!

Marty Drut

Marty Drut, Compiler
January 4, 2017

Editor's Note: The tables mentioned in the above write-up are not included as there are too many pages for this newsletter. If you want the complete report contact the Nature Centre for a copy or the results will soon be posted on the GN website.



Bohemian Waxwings



Cedar Waxwing

David Gee, Producer, Community Access, Shaw TV has produced a clip entitled "CFB Suffield Prairie Ecosystem Sustainability: This short production details the prairie ecosystem and the efforts by the base to protect this system. The link to this story is:

<https://youtu.be/yWAosWzPSW8>

Ranchlands Baby's Breath and Noxious Weeds Removal Project 2016 Summary

Since 2013, the Grasslands Naturalists have worked on the project to deal with the noxious invasive weeds threatening the habitat of the endangered Tiny Cryptantha on Ranchlands Phase 2F&G Environmental Reserve. During the first two summers, Sean Allen organized Calfrac Well Service volunteers to dig thousands of Baby's Breath plants (29,800 in 2013 and 22,000 in 2014). And then during 2015 and 2016, Grasslands Naturalists' volunteers continued the project, by picking the plant tops to prevent seed development (14,700 plants in 2015 and 27,000 in 2016). Also last spring, nearly 4,000 plants were dug in two 100mx100m control plots to further test this method of eradication. Leafy Spurge were also pulled during the four years, but only recorded this year, with over 3,000 plants removed.

The four years of effort on Ranchlands Environmental Reserve has had a very positive, noticeable effect with control of the invasive species. However, it is an ongoing challenge and cannot be left to the City municipal departments alone. So during the past summer, the Grasslands Naturalists through the Interpretive Program held promotional events at the site so the general public could become aware of the issues of the invasive species as well as being able to view the unique features of the Ranchlands Environmental Reserve. Through funding from Medicine Hat City's Lands & Business Support Department, Brenda Powder, a Medicine Hat College student, was hired to coordinate the public programs, and publicize and lead the events involving both interpretive walks in Ranchlands as well as group activities to pick the Baby's Breath plant tops.

It is very important to continue and expand the involvement of the public and community groups in projects of this type so it is hoped the project can be continued in 2017. Education and interpretative programs featuring the prairie ecosystem and the archeological resources located in this special reserve will build support for the necessary work in managing the site. This reserve is a treasure for our citizens, and more active involvement in protecting it will build support for the City's role in its maintenance.

Pictures taken August 11, 2016 with Martha Munz Gue showing the extensive size and seed production of one Baby's Breath plant, the truck loaded with 25 bags of over 2500 plants from one morning of picking the Baby's Breath and Martha sitting amongst the abundant wild flowers are included.

Also, the summer program activities carried out by Brenda Powder have been reported in her [Ranchlands Report](#) available on the GN website.

Submitted by John Slater, Hugh Armstrong and Dave McKenzie





GRASSLANDS NATURALISTS

Box 2491, Medicine Hat, Alberta T1A 8G8

Membership Form for 2017

YES! I would like to be part of the Society of Grasslands Naturalists.

Name: _____ Name of 2nd Family Member: _____

Address: _____

Membership:
Individual: \$20/year _____

City / Prov: _____

Family: \$25/year _____

Postal Code: _____

Organization: \$25/year _____

Telephone: _____

Donation: _____ Tax Receipt Available

Email: _____

TOTAL ENCLOSED: _____

Prefer to receive GN Chronicle by: Post _____ Email _____

Signature(s): _____

Date: _____ Date: _____

Informed Consent and Waiver Form for 2017

I may wish to participate in field trips and events organized by Grasslands Naturalists.

I affirm that as a participant I am prepared to stay with the group and follow the directions of the coordinator. If I choose to bring my child(ren)/ward(s), I will ensure they also stay with the group and follow the directions of the coordinator and activity leader.

I affirm that, knowing my personal state of health, I feel that I am mentally and physically capable of participating in the trips and events that I choose to attend.

I acknowledge that I am aware of the inherent risks, hazards and dangers associated with activities arising from my participation in trips and events which may result in injury to me or result in my death.

Therefore in consideration of my participation in these trips and events, for myself, my heirs, my executors, my administrators and my successors, I voluntarily assume all risks and hereby waive all my rights against Grasslands Naturalists and unconditionally release and discharge the Grasslands Naturalists, its members, directors, officers, its affairs and its coordinators from all manner of activities, causes of action, suits, claims and demands for damages due to personal injury, death, loss or damage to property, expenses or otherwise which may or shall arise in any way as a result of my participation in the above trips and events.

Photograph Release

The Grasslands Naturalists have my expressed permission to use photographs of me in their publications.

Email Consent

The Grasslands Naturalists have my expressed consent to email me with information regarding my membership. Should I choose to revoke this consent, I may do so at any time by contacting Grasslands Naturalists to that effect.

Signature of Member

Signature of 2nd Family Member

Date: _____

Date: _____